

Critical Realism and Causal Research



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Introduction

Teaching mixed methods is one of the most challenging endeavors for professors in the Social Sciences. Beyond topics that must be introduced including numerous methods associated with mixed methodology and the philosophical underpinnings associated with various research typologies the various topics to be covered are increasingly complex. For example textbooks and articles associated with teaching mixed methods research often will cover definitions of ontology, epistemology and axiology and how they are applicable to various research methods, but the challenge associated with teaching these concepts often labeled “worldviews” is to describe why paradigms including post positivism, pragmatism, constructivism are fluid in their definitions and practical applications rather than being linear, constrictive. Further challenging for those who take on the responsibility of teaching mixed methods is providing students with potential paradigms applicable to mixed methods. A review of the literature reveals a majority of empirically based mixed methods studies present pragmatism as the paradigm used to frame the study. Although a few authors have written about alternative paradigms that could be used with mixed methods, no studies could be found that demonstrate the use of an alternative to pragmatism. This may be the result of few who are aware of alternative paradigms that could be used to frame a study, and even fewer who teach mixed methods addressing alternatives. Critical realism is one alternative to pragmatism when conducting causal oriented mixed methods research. In particular, program evaluations warrant the use of critical realism when collecting multiple sources of data to demonstrate a causal relationship. Using a Logic Model framework to organize the program evaluation further organizes the process.

The Problem

Although several authors have written extensively about the applicability of (critical) realism (Christ 2009 &2010; Maxwell, 2004 &2012; Maxwell & Mittapalli 2010; Lipscomb; 2010) as a viable alternative to pragmatism, this is the first time it has been justified as an applicable framework in a mixed methods evaluation. With the popularity of mixed-methods increasing, there is also a call for maintaining rigor of the methods used so that the integrity of multiple methods is not compromised. Often a supplementary method is used in mixed methods studies which draws criticism including being ill-conceptualized, methodologically or theoretically weak, or under-utilized at the point of interface of the data strands.

Purpose

This paper highlights the importance of training researchers about various paradigms including critical Realism when conducting Mixed Methods program evaluations (Christ, 2009; 2010; 2015). Critical Realism as an alternative to pragmatism when conducting causal research relies on methodological techniques that promote the use of multiple data strands. Critical realism as a paradigm combined with the Logic Model to plan and execute program evaluations was the optimal model for one student who graduated in 2015 from the Education Leadership program. Berlage (2015) used a critical realist approach with the Logic Model presented below as a framework for evaluating professional development training for K-12 teachers. (Logic Model Courtesy of Claudia Berlage. Copyright, 2015)

Instructional Coaching Professional Development – Logic Model

Outcome: Building Teachers’ Capacity and Improve Student Learning Outcomes

